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NARRATOR Fanny McGee

INTERVIEWER Phyllis Lotz

PLACE Santa Ynez

DATE May 20, 1981

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Interview with Fanny McGee  
Date of Interview: 20 May 1981, Santa Ynez, California  
Interviewer: Phyllis Lotz  
Transcriber: Phyllis Lotz  
Begin Tape 1, Side 1

PL: Introduction

Will you tell me about yourself?

McGee: I was born in Finland so I am Swedish and Finn. I was fourteen when I came to the United States with my mother and sisters. My father and brother having come over here in April 1912, we came in October 1912. My father had been here from 1901 to 1910. He went through the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. My father was a mill wright so we went directly to Mendocino County, California. I consider myself a native daughter.

PL: How did you get to America?

McGee: We came by boat to New York and from there came across the continent on the train and from San Francisco to Mendocino on a little boat and landed right at the lumber yard on the Alpine River.

PL: Do you remember about the train crossing the United States?

McGee: It was wonderful, the best was as we came through Kansas in October and all the squash, these big yellow round things really impressed us. Denver was a beautiful city. We were amazed with the tomatoes. On the train there was a man selling things and he wanted us to buy some but we couldn't eat them. My cousin who had been in America before was with us and could speak English,



so he bought the things for us. We went through customs on Ellis Island, all the immigrants were herded from one place to another. That was very hard. We had spent three days and two nights in Copenhagen, Denmark before starting for America, and saw the first airplane and I had a ride in my first car. My Dad worked for the lumber company and the town was owned by the company here in Mendocino. They had the store and the houses were rented out to the employees. There was a Chinaman cook. My Dad had built a house for us and he owned 20 acres of farm land which we called Stump Land, where they had taken the lumber out. They sawed the trees, big Redwoods 6 to 8 feet from the ground and we farmed around those stumps. It was too expensive to take them out. The ground was good and we had cows and chickens and pigs.

PL; • Did you go to school?

McGee: No, I had finished grammar school, and then I never had a chance to go to school in this country. I learned to speak English just picking it up from other kids and reading books.

My brother was born in 1895 and I was born in 1898, my sister was born in 1900. My brother did not stay with us, he went up to Eureka where we had an uncle and then he went to Oregon. He worked in the ship yards. He was killed in 1943 in a accident.

My maiden name was Handelin, that was the name of the



old homestead in Finland, when ever some one left, they took the name of the old homestead.

My father nearly worked us to death on the 20 acres. we cleared brush, put grass in for the cows, did all the milking, planted potatos, pulled the smaller stumps. Worked like a man so maybe that has some thing to do with my health troubles right now. My mother passed away in 1920. I did not go to school because my mother had had a stroke and was ill for three years, I had to do the work as my brother had left home. My first husband died in 1919. After Mother died I went to Oakland to work at Magnin's in the alteration department, then I saw an advertizement in the newspaper, "dress maker's helper wanted, no pay, one who wants to learn the trade," so I answered the ad and my employer became just like a mother to me and I worked for her until 1933 when my husband and I came to the Santa Ynez Valley. She had four girls working for her but during the Depression work fell off after 1929. Thats why we came here, there were no jobs, no food. When Roosevelt came in he started the C.C.C. camps and the boys got work, which helped. They also started the W.P.A. and were working on the San Marcos Pass highway, my husband worked on that.

PL: How did you meet your husband?

McGee: He had a friend my sister knew, a Mr. Butler. They had been friends for years and every time my future husband



came into port he would go to see Mr. Butler. He was a sailor in the merchant ships. His name was Ray McGee. I had come to visit my sister in San Francisco, I met him. He was a fireman shoveling coal into the ship's boilers. He never wanted to stay put, he said he wanted to see every thing. That is why after we here he wanted to go places. We would take all the neighbor children on trips, some times 8 or 9 children, and always the Lewis girls. Mrs. Knight said to one time, "Mr. McGee likes all the kids and dogs."

We came to the Santa Ynez Valley because of the Armour Ranch. My husband had served in the Spanish-American War and was stationed in Augusta, Georgia. He did not go over seas as the war ended. Because he was a veteran, we came down here to see about buying land.

PL: Tell me about this plan of Armour land?

McGee: This was the Armour family, the bacon people, from Ohio. They were not living here themselves. It is now Westerly Stud. In the newsletters sent out to all veterans there was this ad for land for sale, but some how the county fought it and the sale did not go through. We did buy land in 1932, and did come here to settle in 1933. The property was on Baseline, and we lived there 12 years, then sold it and went to live in Solvang on First Street where the oak trees stands in the middle of the street. In the little English style house. We lived in Solvang for four years and then



built this house in Santa Ynez on Camino Arroyo. There are two lots here.

PL: What did Santa Ynez look like in the 1930's?

McGee: Santa Ynez did not look like much. The corner house on Meadowvale Street, which used to be called Santa Barbara Street was where Mrs. C.D. Gardner lived, the Knights lived there later. The FitzGeralds were there too and the Ontiveras were next. The Aselsteins were living on Tivola Street when we came. The house where Myrtle Buell lives on Lincoln Street was where a son of FitzGeralds lived. The Knights house burned in 1933 and they moved up town to the house next to the Carriage House Museum (now demolished) on Sagunto Street. Mrs. C.D.Gardner and Minnie Saulsbury started the Sewing Circle and right now I am putting the old scrap book together. Sagunto Street was the business center. Where the Red Barn Restaurant is now was where the Craig's Pavillion, a dance hall and refreshment stand was located. Charlie Burd, Mr. and Mrs. Craig, and Mr. McGinnis played in the band. When they got the community building, where the school is now, we had dances and dinners there. The old high school building we here when we came at the end of Sagunto Street and between building the new high school, the children had classes in tents because I remember Eileen Murphy and Philip Knight graduated from those tents. Mrs. Step lived in a little house near us, she died in 1953 at the



age of 92, the same year my husband died and he was 73. He was 20 years older than I. In the beginning of the sewing circle we had ten members: Mrs. Gardner, Mrs. Cross, Charlene Stark, Minnie and Blanche Bennett, Myrtle Buell, Gertrude Downs, and others. Those I remember living in town were the Gardners, Knights, FitzGeralds, Craigs, Williams.

End of Side 1, Tape 1

Begin Side 2, Tape 1

PL: Why was the sewing circle started?

McGee: Mrs. Gardner was teaching Sunday School and she needed new Sunday School books. They were real hard up and the Ladies Aid did not have any money. Between Minnie Saulsbury and Mrs. Gardner, they decided to start a little club, so a little sewing and with the money, buy the song books that were needed for Sunday School, but in no way were they connected with the church. They wanted to help any one who needed help, say, during the Depression and such. We had dances at Minetti's barn. Minetti's was right back of the Chevron Service Station in the now vacant lot. When the C.C.C. camps were here we would give dances on Saturday nights and let them in free and serve them donuts and coffee. I remember one Saturday night the roof was leaking like a sieve but



they kept right on dancing. At that time the Minettis were operating a little meat market where the Foss Real Estate office is now. Mrs. Minetti was a Marre, Virginia Marre. The Marre's had a place in Happy Canyon. The Minettis had a little hotel behind the meat market. The hotel was torn down and all the lumber went out on Baseline where Gene and Virginia Saulbury built a house with that lumber. Alonzo Crabb lived in the house that Mrs. Step, my neighbor bought. Crabb was town. The Harold Buells were out at the ranch in 1933.

PL: Tell me about the Crabbs?

McGee: He was a big man and she was very short and stout, maybe 4 feet, they looked like Mutt and Jeff. She always looked good.

Fred Stevens was Supervisor then. There was a big brick building at Sagunto and Edison, a large hall upstairs and grocery store down stairs, the Meads ran that store. Old Tom Ontiveros were here then. The while two story house on Calzada is the Ontiveros home. Charles Ontiveros lived on Tivola, which was called Main St. That house burned down.

PL: When there was a fire, how was it put out?

McGee: You just didn't put it out. The Knights were away on a 4th of July picnic and they lost every thing. She had 13 children but none of their possessions were left. Mrs. Tunnel was the oldest, she had some children living in Buellton, then came Violet Robison, Mrs. Lewis lived



on Tivola in that house with the porch on it at the corner of Faraday and Sagunto. Her husband was leaving when we came. She had 5 or 6 children, Martha Saulsbury is a Lewis, and Laura Alegria, then Barbara and Rena, and the boy died. We took prizes on our garden products, walnuts and melons. We raised practically all we could eat. We had a family orchard and walnuts, 14 acres in grain too. Of course we didn't have to pay so much for things then as you do now. At our sewing circle meetings we did not have refreshments because Mrs. Gardner did not believe in eating between meals. Later we started having cookies and such. Pot Lucks came later. The way we made money was with the Pig in the Poke. You bid on it and the money goes into the treasury for different projects. We did sew and sell things up until 1950 and we did help the Sunday School quite a bit. Now we support a child at Porterville, a ward of the court. And we help LOVARC, for retarded children in Lompoc. Over \$500 to the hospital over the years. Most of our members are old now and they don't want to work. I am a charter member of the Grange that was started in 1937. After the grange uses their money for up-keep on the hall they give away a lot to projects

PL: What does the future hold for you now?

McGee: I don't know, I just hope that I can go on, just sitting is no good. I was out pulling weeds last year and did all my chores. I remember the first year we came to



the Santa Ynez Valley, the hills were full of wild flowers and it was so beautiful.

PL: Thank you for this interview.



Interview with Fanny McGee

Date of Interview: 17 June 1981, Santa Ynez, California

Interviewer: Phyllis Lotz

Transcriber: Phyllis Lotz

Begin Tape 1, Side 1

PL: Introduction

McGee: We have been in the Santa Ynez Valley since 1933, and lived out on Baseline. The farmers at that time were our neighbors, Pete Petersen who had 80 acres facing El Rpbilar, then John Armpiel, also a Dane. They came here when the colony opened in 1911 but they did not buy land in Solvang. They settled out here in Santa Ynez. At the corner of Baseline and Edison, called Telephone Road then, were the Dotys who had just started to work the land again. Mr. Bennett was their forman. We did not have electricity when we first came so we all went in together and got electricity. We had a colar plant on our place to run, gasoline motor when the wind mill did not go, for the well. So we got together and had PG&E bring in electricity. But we had to guarantee so much money before electric stoves were put in. This was in 1934. Further west on Baseline they did have electricity.

PL: How did you keep your food fresh in those days?

McGee: You had a sort of thing under the pump house where the wind mill was and where it was nice and cool and I kept food there. You hung up this box and put sacks that were wet over the box. You did not buy much food ahead of time. You raised practically everything and ate it



up the same day. Family orchard, and canned all the fruit and vegetables. There was a big prune orchard on Baseline when we came that was sold to people from Gardena named Roth, Jack Roth, German people. They had had vegetable stands and chickens in Gardena, were originally from Indiana. They bought the prune ranch but then they went to Folded Hills ranch, near Nojoqui and fed their turkeys grasshoppers. They would herd these little turkeys as you would do sheep. It was remarkable, they would just take those little things out and they had a dog and all over these fields here they would feed on grasshoppers, and the turkey's crop would be so full they could hardly walk. For two years we had bad grasshoppers but then the county agriculturist started to spray for squirrels and grasshoppers and finally we got rid of them. This was Depression times and people did not do much farming, only producing what they needed for themselves. The Roths took all the prune trees out and that is where the Jacobensen Dairy is now. After the Roths went to Nojoqui where they were raising turkeys, people from Los Angeles came in and bought that place, named Powers. Powers sold to Jacobensens who started the dairy and there are only two dairies left in the Valley, this one and one in Euellton. Many of the Danes who came from Humbolt County and from Nebraska, were dairy people. Most of the original Danes are gone, this is the second



generation. Since the war ended in 1945 the young men went to other things not to farming. The growth and economy boomed after the war and Camp Cook helped.

On the other side of Baseline were farmers like the Murphys, Tom Murphy, William Murphy, and Ben Alfonso was further west on Baseline. On the corner of Baseline and Refugio was the Arbalight family, which they still own. That was all walnut orchard but that is all out now. Forsyth was the first to plant walnuts. We had olives and peaches and apples. A brother-in-law of Mrs. Powers put in 80 acres of apples, all kinds and they were just beautiful. The Saundersons came in and was forman for Libby and Libby over in the San Joaquin Valley, he came here and raised peaches.

PL: Why did they take out all those orchards?

McGee: They last only so long, and then they began irrigation and started raised alfalfa. There were quite a few turkey ranches here but they are funny things, they will kill each other and you have to give them poison in their drinking water.

PL: How long did you live on Baseline?

McGee: We sold the ranch in 1945 so we were there for 12 years and then we moved to Solvang. My husband worked on the new highway of San Marcos Pass. He also worked on fire trails until he retired. Others on Baseline were the Stephensens, next to Alphonsos and across the road were the Underhills, and



then there were no houses until Ballard. Nothing on Calzada except the while house of the Ontiveroses. The young Janins and the Arden Jensens came here about the same time as we. Nothing in Solvang until after the war. We lived in Solvang for four years and did not like it, the war was on and you could not buy anything. In 1933 when we came you could buy most any land for 30 dollars an acre. In Solvang, on First Street were our neighbors the Olivers and Horsyls. The Parsons came shortly after we did, and he was a druggist. The bank was on the corner of First and Main (Copenhagen). Our street was not paved and ran on either side of the big oak tree. Then Mrs. Step of Santa Ynez said she would sell us the two lots we have now. I said I would not be happy until I moved back to Santa Ynez. My brother-in-law built this house I live in now. Mr. Skytt built the big house that we lived in first. Bobby Aselstein worked on our house when he came back from the war. Aselstein and McKillop developed all those houses on Country Road just off Refugio. And McKillop developed all those houses in Highland Park. There was nothing there before that. The Shepherds live in one of the Torrance houses. East Santa Ynez was just fields and raising cattle. There were livery stables in town, and the Ontiveros had a big barn where you could rent horses and buggys. The Knights moved into Mrs. Gardners house after she died. Gertrude Downs and her husband worked



for Mankins who were on the Doheny Ranch. Art Forrester worked for Dohenys too. Jack Downs was Gertrude's husband. The William Anderson's had the water works in town. They would go around and collect the money for water. Those pipes are still down there underground and they tried to find the pipes when Cachuma water came in. They may have used some of that old pipe for the new system. One time there was too much pressure in the line and the side walk blew up. Jack Anderson, one of the sons worked for the water system and was a fire man too. In town Minetti had a place on the corner where the service station is now. The real estate office was once a meat market. The brick building on the corner was a grocery store. But we traded in Solvang. We took eggs or other good to trade for what we wanted. Rev. Wilhoit lived in the Manse, next to the church on Lincoln and Tivola. Dan Murphy was Post Master when we came in 1933. The Santa Ynez Post Office was across the street from where it is now, in one of those false front stores.

End of Side 1, Tape 1

Begin Side 2, Tape 1

When Mrs. Ruth Pratt became Post Master she built a new building because the old one was getting too small.



It was a third class post office then. Our box number was 15, when we came. Craig's Pavillion was a dance hall and was where the Red Barn is now. The Public Library was next to the pavillion but it was moved east to its present site by the Historical Museum. Edna Craig was librarian. Joe Miller was her half brother, and he was foreman on the San Lucas Ranch. They lived in town. There were three house where the high school is now, one was Wayne Millers, one was Livingstons, he was principal of the College School and the third house was the Ortegas, but they all burned down. Quinns had a house where Harrison's Hardware is now, that was Mable Quinn Henderson's mothers house. Mable ran a store for years, the store belonged to Mr. Brown. Then Clair Robison had the store, Violet Knight Robison was his wife. Pete Parker ran the snack bar at the Craig Pavillion where there were dances, and he worked at the College Hotel before that. Santa Ynez has not grown much, it is the farming land that has changed and grown with homes and people.

Once a week we would get in our cars, most every one had a car, ours was a Hupmobile when we first came, and we would see a movie in Solvang at Axel Nielsen's movie theater.

PL: Do you remember the Indians on the Reservation?

McGee: There were only a few huts on the reservation when we came in 1933, most of the people lived in town. On the



south side of Hwy. 246 at Edison there was a man named Charlie Petersen who had a vegetable garden and he never needed to irrigate, there was a spring that watered his land. He grew the most wonderful vegetables and if I did not have something I'd go there to buy or trade. The few Indians that lived there also had gardens and they did not irrigate because of the spring, and the Zanja de Cota Creek ran all year, in those days but it is dry now. The spring dried up when the deep wells were put in. There were no deep wells when we came. Sanchez built the feed store at Edison and Sagunto, the former site of the College Hotel, he was working on the Armour Ranch and when it was sold he came into town, this was Marcus Sanchez. He built the warehouse and his boys have carried on. They are now in heavy construction.

Our Sewing Circle was instrumental in getting the painting by Old Man Block for the Historical Museum, Ellen Gleason was one of our members. I went with her to Mr. Block's to pick out the painting she wanted for the museum.

My husband made 19 trips to China as a seaman, and this was before 1920.

I never got back to Finland although my sister do go.

PL: Thank you, Mrs. McGee for the interview today.